

# Milan Mrkusich

**b.1925**

Self-taught

Early in his career, Milan Mrkusich realised that he wasn't interested in showing people or nature in his painting – he didn't find doing portraits or landscapes inspiring at all. Instead, Mrkusich wants people to understand that paintings don't need to be 'of' something, or 'about' something – paintings simply 'are'.

This is how he once explained his point. Suppose there's a painting called 'Kaipara Mudflats'. A person might see it and say, "Look, it's the Kaipara mudflats". That's not how Mrkusich sees it. "It's not the Kaipara mudflats", he said. "It's a painting. It's paint. To me it's just a whole lot of grey paint".

Mrkusich tends to work in series, exploring an idea in different ways over a number of paintings. It might be an idea about how two colours work together, or how two shapes relate to each other, or how shapes might be organised using their mathematical properties. He approaches making the actual painting, only after having worked through the ideas first with diagrams, colour plans and models.

*Painting Achromatic With Yellow* is one of a number of paintings from 2001 in which Mrkusich explored the effects of putting achromatic colours (the neutral colours: black, white and grey) together with chromatic colours (red and yellow, blue and green, and the other colours of the spectrum). Finding out what happens when you put chromatic and achromatic colours alongside each other is one of his longstanding interests.

In the painting, a pale grey band is placed against the softer grey background. A band of darker grey, the same width as the pale band, lies horizontally across the painting. The dark band recedes: the pale band projects forward, and would cut the painting in half, if Mrkusich hadn't put a 'stopper' at the bottom, a black square that anchors it. Into this carefully balanced structure Mrkusich introduces a yellow triangle: it's a bit rowdy, a bit disruptive, and it makes the painting come alive.

Mrkusich was born in Dargaville in 1925 – his family had come to New Zealand from Yugoslavia after World War I. When he was two the family moved to Auckland, where he has lived

ever since. In the early 1940s Mrkusich took a commercial art course, but he is mostly self-taught, and he established his abstract painting style in the late 1940s.

However, painting (especially abstract painting, which was seen as a bit suspect and 'foreign' in the 1940s) didn't pay the bills, and in 1949 Mrkusich and two colleagues set up Brenner Associates, an architectural design company. Mrkusich worked there until 1958, as a colour consultant, designing exhibition and display designs. He even designed his own modern home, in the early 1950s, where he still lives and paints. Gradually abstract art won greater acceptance, and Mrkusich had his first major survey show at the Auckland Art Gallery in 1972. In 2003 he was given an Icon Award by the New Zealand Arts Foundation, recognising his lifelong achievement as an artist.

## Courtney Johnston

### Galleries and museums:

[www.aucklandartgallery.govt.nz](http://www.aucklandartgallery.govt.nz)  
[www.christchurchartgallery.org.nz](http://www.christchurchartgallery.org.nz)  
[www.dunedin.art.museum/collection.asp](http://www.dunedin.art.museum/collection.asp)  
[www.govettbrewster.com](http://www.govettbrewster.com)  
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### Articles:

[www.art-newzealand.com/Issues11to20/mrkusich.htm](http://www.art-newzealand.com/Issues11to20/mrkusich.htm)  
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